

Apology Strategies of Algerian University Students of English

Abstract:

The current study aims at investigating the apology strategies employed by Algerian university students of English relative to the factors of social power, distance and severity of the offense. The data for analysis in this study were collected through a Discourse Completion Questionnaire and interviews. The findings revealed that the respondents preferred giving direct expressions of apology and taking on responsibility more than the other strategies. The informants also resorted to new strategies namely, a call to hold anger, determinism and arrogance. The results further showed that the severity of the offense was the predominant factor that determined the selection and intensity of apology strategies. All the interviewees agreed that apology speech act maintains harmony among people.

Key Words: Apology speech act, EFL learners, Discourse Completion Task (DCT), apology strategies

ملخص:

تهدف الدراسة الحالية لتقصي استراتيجيات الاعتذار التي اعتمدها الطلبة الجزائريين المتعلمين للغة الانجليزية في الجامعة مع الاخذ بعين الاعتبار الطبقة الاجتماعية و درجة القرابة للأشخاص الذين يدينون لهم بالاعتذار و كذا حجم الإساءة التي تستدعي الاعتذار. هذا و قد تم جمع مادة الدراسة عن طريق اختبار إكمال المحادثة و مقابلات حوارية مع الطلبة. أوضحت النتائج أن الطلبة فضلوا تقديم أعذار مباشرة و تحمل المسؤولية أكثر من الاستراتيجيات الأخرى. كما اعتمد الطلبة أيضا استراتيجيات اعتذار جديدة منها دعوة الشخص المتضرر لتمالك غضبه و الإشارة إلى أن الأمر قضاء و قدر و كذا إعلان أن الخطأ ليس من طرفهم. أشارت النتائج أيضا أن حدة الخطأ هي أهم عامل مؤثر على لاستعمال واسع النطق و المشدد لاستراتيجيات الاعتذار. هذا و قد أكد جميع من تمت محاورتهم أن الاعتذار أمر هام للحفاظ على العلاقات الاجتماعية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاعتذار, اختبار إكمال المحادثة , طلبه اللغة الانجليزية , استراتيجيات الاعتذار

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Introduction :

To achieve their communicative goals, speakers employ a variety of speech acts such as apologies (Kasper, 2001). They are difficult to perform since it is essential that language learners realize whether a specific action or utterance calls for an apology or not and make use of appropriate linguistic forms.

The choice of these linguistic forms is affected by social and contextual factors including power, distance and severity of the offense (Trosborg, 1987; House, 1988; Bergman & Kasper, 1993). It is, thus, the aim of this study to investigate the apology strategies adopted by university students of English in relation with the social status of their interlocutors, the degree of familiarity between these interlocutors and severity of the offense. The questions addressed in this study are:

1. What are the semantic formulas EFL learners use to realize the speech act of apology?
2. To what extent do the strategies employed reflect power, distance differences and severity perceptions among the informants?

On the basis of the above questions, it is hypothesized that apology strategy choice is mainly affected by the seriousness of the offense.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Apology Speech Act

In his famous work *How to do things with words*, Austin (1962) claims that communication is a series of communicative acts which are used to accomplish particular goals, and that all utterances perform specific actions by having a specific force assigned to them. According to Austin, the performance of a speech act involves the performance of three types of acts: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts.

Building on Austin's work, Searle (1969) claims that the basic units of human linguistic communication are illocutionary acts which are rule-governed forms of behaviour. He presents five basic kinds of actions that one can perform in an utterance. They are: representatives, directives, commissives, expressives and declarations.

Apology is a speech act on which considerable literature exists. Most of the studies that are relevant to the speech act of apology have been carried out to explore the preconditions, functions and formulas of this act (Fraser, 1981; Goffman, 1971; Holmes, 1989; Leech, 1983). Trosborg (1995) states that the preconditions for the apology act are as follows:

There are two participants: an apologizer and a recipient of the apology. When a person has performed an act, or failed to do so, which has offended another person, and for which he/she can be held responsible, the offender needs to apologize. That is, the act of apologizing requires an action or an utterance which is intended to set things right (p. 373).

As far as the functions of an apology are concerned, Apologies are viewed as remedial work; their central function is to provide a remedy for an offense and store social equilibrium or harmony (Edmundson, 1981). Apologies are also viewed as face-saving acts. As far as the formulas of

apology are concerned, Olshtain and Cohen (1983; 18-35) identify three types of apology strategies:

- (1) Strategies of opting out
- (2) Strategies of Apologies
- (3) Strategies of Remedial Support

1.2 Previous Studies on Inter-language Apology

Inter-language apology studies generally investigate learners' production and perceptions of the universality or specificity of the patterns used for apologizing. Other studies have focused on the effect of the social and contextual variables on the selection of the apology strategy (Bergman & Kasper, 1993; Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; House, 1988).

In an examination of the apology strategies used by Americans and Jordanian speakers of English, Hussein et al (1998) found out that Jordanians tended to praise Allah for everything that happened (whether good or bad) and attacked the offended. The researchers attributed these differences to the influence of culture, patterns of thought and religious orientations. Regarding the influence of social power, results indicated that Jordanians employed titles whenever the hearer was of higher social status.

Since the objective of the current study is to investigate Algerian EFL learners' apology strategies relative to the factors of social status, distance and severity of the offense, an empirical design is important to account for any variability in the realization of the speech act of apology.

2. Methodology

2.1 Informants

The current study involves 60 third year students of English working towards a BA degree in Applied Language Studies at the University of Constantine 1. They are homogeneous in many aspects such as social class, educational background and age.

2.2 Research Instrument

To elicit data on the realization patterns of apology speech act employed by the informants, a 12-item Discourse Completion Questionnaire based on Olshtain and Cohen 's (1983) model was adopted. Interviewing was also another instrument that was adopted in the present study. The data were studied from the interviews undertaken with 8 participants.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Overall Patterns of Apology Strategy Use by EFL Learners

Table 1 shows the occurrence number and percentage frequency of the eight main apology strategies used by EFL learners. Figure 1 is the graphic representation of the percentage frequency of these strategies. They clearly illustrate that, consistent with Cohen and Olshtain (1981) 's findings, EFL learners utilize similar apology patterns as native speakers of English do.

| Apology Strategies | N | % |
|----------------------------|-------------|------------|
| Opt out | 26 | 2.2 |
| Evasive strategy | 10 | 0.8 |
| Acknowledge Responsibility | 280 | 23.8 |
| Provide Explanation | 112 | 9.5 |
| Direct Apology | 554 | 47.1 |
| Express Concern | 30 | 2.5 |
| Promise of Forbearance | 12 | 1 |
| Offer Repair | 152 | 12.9 |
| Total | 1176 | 100 |

Table1: Overall Occurrence Number and Percentage Frequency of the Eight Main Apology Strategies Used by EFL Learners

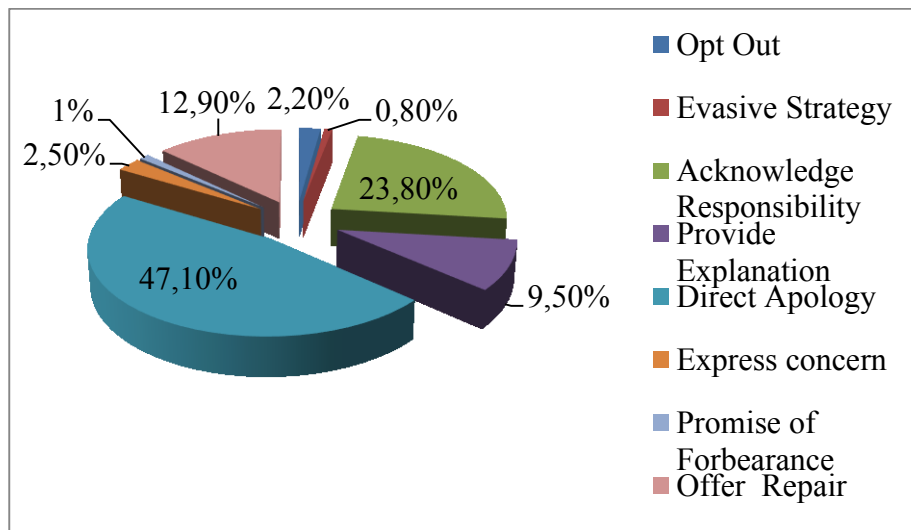


Figure 1: Percentage Frequency of the Eight Main Apology Strategies Used by EFL Learners

Table 1 and figure 1 clearly reveal that consistent with previous studies (Bergman & Kasper, 1993; Cohen & Olshtain, 1981), direct expressions of apology and acknowledgement of responsibility were the most frequently occurring strategies.

3.1.1 Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs)

Figure 2 shows the distribution of the sub-categories of the strategy of direct expression of an apology based on the classification system of Cohen and Olshtain (1983) adopted in this study. It reveals that EFL learners used the three different manifestations of the direct expression of apology. The expression of regret *I am sorry* was the most frequent one (78%) then a request

of forgiveness (18.7%). The offer of an apology was used less frequently (2.8%).

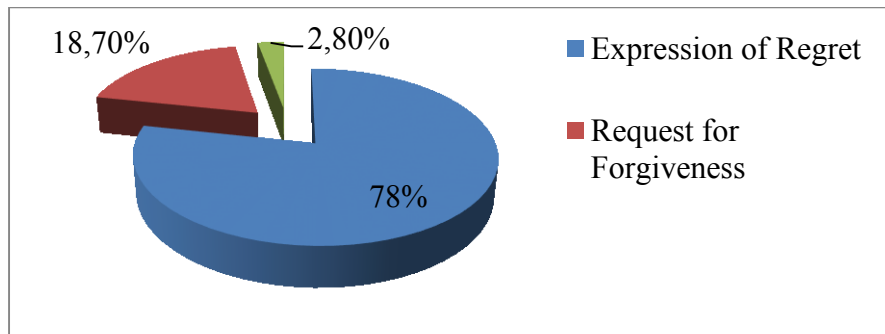


Figure 2: Percentage Frequency of the Sub-categories of the Strategy of Direct Expression of Apology Used by EFL Learners

3.1.2 Acknowledge Responsibility

Acknowledgement of responsibility was realized in five main sub-strategies.

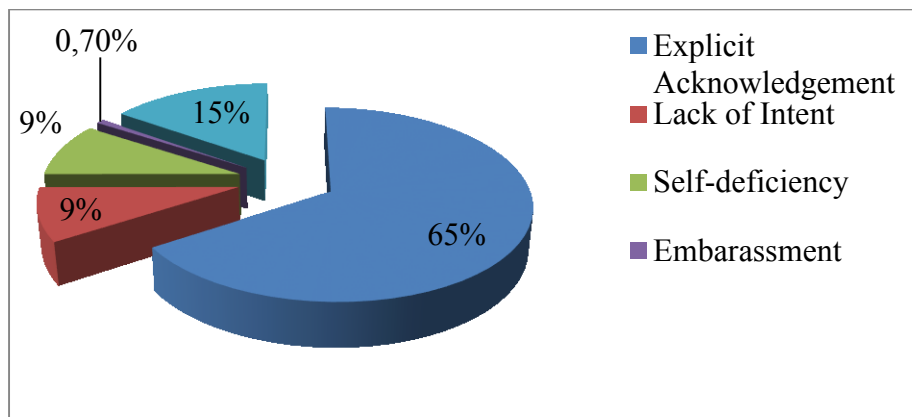


Figure 3: Percentage Frequency of the Sub-categories of the Strategy of an Acknowledgement of Responsibility

As the figure above shows, the most frequent sub-formula used to acknowledge responsibility is the explicit acknowledgement of responsibility (65%). It helps appease the offended as the apologizer avoids being in disagreement with him/her.

I am really sorry. *I forgot to inform you.*

3. 1.3 Offer Repair

Consistent with Blum-Kulka et al (1989) findings, this strategy was resorted to when a physical damage was involved as exemplified below.

I am very sorry. *I will pay for the damage.*

3.1.4 Account

All EFL learners resorted to explicit reasons to minimize the blame assigned to them. They gave accounts where no physical damage was involved to signal that they did not aim to shift responsibility and attach it to another party.

I am so sorry. It is my fault but *my mother was ill yesterday.*

3.1.5 Express Concern

This strategy was resorted to when a space offence was involved.

I am sorry. It is my fault. *Are you okay?*

3.1.6 Opt Out

The most frequently occurring sub-strategy was keeping silent (46%). EFL learners resorted to it because they thought the offense was not severe enough to call for an apology.

3.1.7 Promise of Forbearance

EFL learners employed this strategy when they had to apologize for copying an essay from the internet. This might be linked to the assumption that they will continue to have sessions with the teacher.

I will bring it (the book) to you tomorrow.

3.1.8 Evasive Strategy

Seeking to minimize the degree of the severity of the offense, EFL learners used just two formulas; minimizing and an expression of humour .

3.1.9 Alerter

EFL learners used *titles* (including ‘ teacher ’, ‘ professor ’ and ‘ sir ’) more frequently (59%) to show they are aware of the social status of the hearer. They also utilized *solidarity and endearment forms* (30%) to say that they know the hearer well. *General nouns* (9%) were used by EFL learners to say they were aware of the neutral social distance of their interlocutors. The form ‘ students ’ was employed.

3.1.10 Intensification Means

Adverbials such as ‘ so ’, ‘ very ’ and ‘ really ’ were used intensively (44%). Emotional phrases (22%) such as ‘ Oh my God ’ were used to express a lack of intent.

3.2 Newly Employed Apology Strategies

The findings revealed new apology strategies which were not found in Cohen and Olshtain ’ s (1983) model. These new strategies are considered as culturally specific manifestations that characterize apologies in the Algerian society. Figure 4 shows the distribution of these new strategies across the twelve situations.

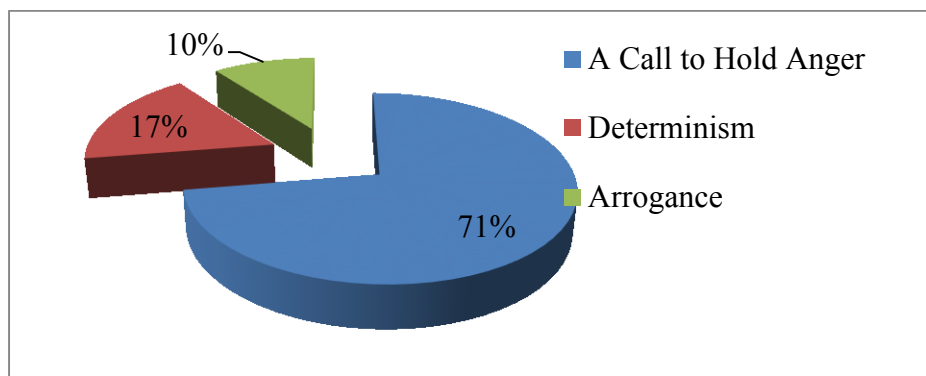


Figure 4: Percentage Frequency of the Newly Employed Apology Strategies

3.2.1 A Call to Hold Anger

This strategy calls for the offended to hold anger. It was of a relatively high incidence in situations where physical damage was involved.

I am sorry. *Don ' t be angry with me.* I will bring you a new one (camera).

3.2.2 Determinism

This apology strategy was resorted to by EFL learners to provide excuses for the offenses they committed. They thought they were not to be blamed each time as every offense was out of their control.

I am sorry but *I believe it would have happened anyway.*

3.2.3 Arrogance

This strategy was resorted to by EFL learners when they acted directly without any consideration for the hearer ' s face.

Change this order. I don ' t want it.

3.3 Contextual Factors and Apology Strategy Use

3.3.1 Social Status

Table 2 below lists the occurrence number and percentage frequency of the semantic formulas used by EFL learners based on their interlocutors' social status.

| Apology Strategies | High Status | | Equal Status | | Low Status | |
|---------------------|-------------|------|--------------|------|------------|------|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Opt out | 0 | 0 | 12 | 46.1 | 14 | 53.8 |
| Evasive strategy | 2 | 20 | 6 | 60 | 2 | 20 |
| Acknowledge | 86 | 30.7 | 106 | 37.8 | 88 | 31.4 |
| Responsibility | 42 | 37.5 | 26 | 23 | 44 | 39 |
| Provide Explanation | 180 | 32 | 188 | 33.9 | 186 | 33.5 |
| Direct Apology | 12 | 40 | 18 | 60 | 0 | 0 |

| | | | | | | |
|------------------------|-----|-----|----|----|----|----|
| Concern for Hearer | 12 | 100 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Promise of Forbearance | 42 | 27 | 44 | 28 | 66 | 43 |
| Offer Repair | 112 | 59 | 26 | 13 | 50 | 26 |
| Alerter | 152 | 56 | 76 | 28 | 40 | 14 |
| Intensifier | | | | | | |

Table 2: Occurrence Number and Percentage Frequency of Apology Strategies Used by EFL Learners in Relation to Social Status

The strategy of opting out was used most with low and equal status situations. The strategy of providing accounts was used significantly more with high status interlocutor. The use of the direct expression of apology by EFL learners was not associated with social status. Results clearly show that a promise of forbearance was used most with high status interlocutors.

Apology intensity correlates positively with social power. A higher proportion of intensification means (adverbials 42% mainly) used in apologizing to high status situations (56%).

As to alerts, EFL learners used them most frequently in interaction with high status interlocutors (59%). Three forms were employed: *titles* (59%), *solidarity and endearment forms* (30%), and *general nouns* (9%).

3.3.2 Social Distance

Table 3 lists the occurrence number and percentage frequency of each strategy used by EFL learners in relation to social distance.

| Apology Strategies | High Distance | | Medium Distance | | Low Distance | |
|------------------------|---------------|------|-----------------|------|--------------|------|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Opt out | 14 | 53 | 0 | 0 | 12 | 46 |
| Evasive strategy | 6 | 60 | 2 | 20 | 2 | 20 |
| Acknowledge | 82 | 29 | 114 | 40 | 84 | 30 |
| Responsibility | 16 | 14 | 68 | 60 | 28 | 25 |
| Provide Explanation | 160 | 28.8 | 206 | 37 | 188 | 33.9 |
| Direct Apology | 12 | 40 | 2 | 6 | 16 | 53 |
| Concern for Hearer | 0 | 0 | 12 | 100 | 0 | 0 |
| Promise of Forbearance | 46 | 30 | 52 | 34 | 54 | 35.5 |
| Offer Repair | 58 | 30 | 72 | 38 | 58 | 30 |
| Alerter | 130 | 48.5 | 80 | 29.8 | 58 | 21.6 |
| Intensifier | | | | | | |

Table 3: Occurrence Number and Percentage Frequency of Apology Strategies Used by EFL Learners in Relation to Social Distance

The strategy of opting out was found to be used noticeably most with strangers (53%). A finding conforms to Bonikowska ' s (1988) observation that the highest number of opting out responses occurs in high distance situations. Accounts were most given to acquaintances (60%). It seems that EFL learners did not use this strategy to strangers because of the reduced

chance of ever seeing each other again. They did not use it to close friends because they thought it would not be necessary to do this. Expressions of direct apology were exchanged among acquaintances (37%). As far as the strategies of offering remedial support are concerned, the strategies of expressing concern (53%) and offering repair (35%) were used much more with close friends. This result can be accounted for in that they would have the chance to see each other again. As to the strategy of providing a promise of forbearance, it was only used to acquaintances. This finding may be related to the social status of the hearer. EFL learners may be afraid of academic penalty by the teacher.

As to the use of intensifiers, EFL learners used them extensively (48%) in interaction with strangers. EFL learners used the highest percentage of alerters with acquaintances (38%). EFL learners may have thought that their relationship with close friends or strangers is unambiguous and does not call for the use of an alerter as their relationship with acquaintances.

3.3.3 Severity of the Offense

Table 4 lists the occurrence number and percentage frequency of each apology strategy used by EFL learners in relation to severity of the offense.

| Apology Strategies | High Severity | | Low Severity | |
|------------------------|---------------|------|--------------|------|
| | N | % | N | % |
| Opt out | 0 | 0 | 26 | 100 |
| Evasive strategy | 8 | 80 | 2 | 20 |
| Acknowledge | 174 | 62 | 106 | 37.8 |
| Responsibility | 52 | 46.4 | 60 | 53.5 |
| Provide Explanation | 266 | 48 | 288 | 51.9 |
| Direct Apology | 28 | 93 | 2 | 6.6 |
| Concern for Hearer | 12 | 100 | 0 | 0 |
| Promise of Forbearance | 86 | 56.5 | 66 | 43.4 |
| Offer Repair | 84 | 44.6 | 104 | 55.5 |
| Alerter | 214 | 79.8 | 54 | 20 |
| Intensifier | | | | |

Table 4: Occurrence Number and Percentage Frequency of Apology Strategies Used by EFL Learners in Relation to Severity of Offense

The strategy of opting out was found to be used significantly more in low severity situations. This finding supports Bonikowska (1988) 's claim that one of the reasons why a speaker chooses to opt out is that s / he does not perceive the situation as an offense and thus there is no need to say anything. The strategy of acknowledgement of responsibility was used most in more severe situations (62%). Interestingly, EFL learners used the direct expression of apology strategy more frequently in less severe situations (51.9%). In case of non-severe offenses, the speakers do not worry about losing face so they are prompt to offer apologies. All the strategies of remedial support were most used in high severity situations.

Observing the percentages of intensified IFIDs in each situation, it was found that severe offenses were likely to trigger more intensified apologies (97%).

All the interviewees said that apology speech act was important in maintaining harmony and redressing offenses. For the three socio-linguistic variables; social status, social distance and severity of offense, the findings from the interview data supported the findings from the questionnaire data. When apologizing, the participants were only sensitive to the hearer 's social status when the offense was serious. They Acknowledged responsibility and promised not to repeat the wrong deed because of their fear of academic penalty. In addition, they stated that the degree of familiarity with the hearer affected the choice of the patterns they employ. They used formal and polite apologies to address strangers. They, however, used less complex and shorter apologies when addressing acquaintances. However, results showed that even close friends were given more complex and formal apologies when the situation was severe. Finally, participants used different apology patterns in relation to severity of offense. More severe situations triggered intensified, complex apologies of explicit expressions of apology and other indirect strategies such as acknowledgement of responsibility or account.

Conclusion

The current study has been an attempt to outline the semantic formulas used in apologizing by Algerian third year students of English at the university of Constantine 1. A Discourse Completion Questionnaire of 12 situations designed to be categorized by the social status, distance and offense severity perceptions as well as Interviews were adopted. Results revealed that EFL learners preferred giving direct expressions of apology and taking on responsibility more than the other apology strategies. EFL learners utilized intensification means such as adverbials and alerters, including titles, solidarity forms and general nouns. EFL learners adopted new strategies that were not considered in Cohen and Olshtain (1983) 's model. These included a call to hold anger (most used where a physical damage is involved), determinism to provide excuses for the offense one committed and arrogance to show they did not perceive themselves responsible for the offense. Findings indicated that EFL learners intensified the apologies given to high status interlocutors to evade any academic penalty. They gave simple expressions of apology to acquaintances whereas they offered polite complex ones to strangers. Such formal apologies were given to close friends when the offense was perceived as severe. Learners' intensified apologies were more frequently given in high severity situations. Severity of offense then seems to be the predominant factor that affects the selection and intensity of apology strategy. All the interviewees agreed that apology speech act maintained harmony among people.

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